

The Pitfall of Regional Interests and Reconstruction in Afghanistan

by James Clad

The Context

The regional factors within Afghanistan...

uch of the dynamic in Central Asia today can be traced to the forces for unity and division in this mountainous meeting ground of the Near East, Central Asia, South Asia, and beyond. Whatever the names that adjoining polities have carried—whether Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, or the Central Asian Republics—their time-honored use of surrogates to play out their rivalries has continued into the present era. To expect any fundamental change in this basic equation risks naïveté. Nonetheless, two disturbing developments have occurred in present-day Afghanistan that portend change. First, we see a tremendous exacerbation of factionalism, a derivative of two decades of war. In these wars, the wide distribution of weaponry has dramatically raised the risk of failure to the losing side. Secondly, the departure from Afghanistan of its educated classes has led to a serious degradation of political culture. Today, this culture is characterized by ruthless and acquisitive tribal leaderships in fierce contention for resources—including aid resources.

Through decades of factionalism and war—to which the latest engagement simply added new destructiveness—the Afghan polity has come perilously close to losing its once inclusive and remarkably durable identity.

...and what this means for international assistance.

The international community appears resigned to a prolonged period of weak central-government rule with localized exercise of power by competing factions. As donors target assistance to needy-but-insecure areas, intensified factional struggles for these resources is badly complicating aid delivery. The long-term implications are obvious:

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Donors worry that their acceptance of a patchwork quilt of security and need, stitched together by separate deals with warlords, will impede development of a viable government. Furthermore, without careful attention to how resources are distributed, donors fear they will unwittingly further weaken the already weak Bonn-agreement interim government and the Loya Jerga government that will follow.

The regional factors outside Afghanistan...

Interestingly, the past two decades of conflict have *not* provoked neighboring countries to assert irredentist claims on Afghanistan. Nor have they prompted ethnic compatriots to seek neighboring country support for the country's dissolution. The *idea* of Afghanistan remains surprisingly intact; however, the *reality* of a functioning Afghan polity, expressed by a central government in Kabul, remains uncomfortably distant.

Beyond Afghanistan, the strategies and composition of neighboring states and of the elites who exercise state power call for close examination. Donors should be mindful of the durability of these contending forces and devise aid strategies that accept the inevitability of this reality. However, their strategies should also seek to balance these forces. The international relationships forged or deepened since the September terrorist attacks reveal the potential for applying a regional strategy to consolidate the weak, reconstituted central authority in Kabul. Without such a strategy, we

risk destabilizing not only Afghanistan, but also the region beyond.

Reconstruction in Afghanistan remains hostage, in part, to continuing instability in Pakistan, an instability exacerbated by India's efforts to take advantage of abrupt policy reversals forced upon Pakistan's leaders by U.S. diplomacy after September 11. Further complicating the situation is the likelihood of Pakistan's continuing to aid its Afghan Pathan allies—who have important links to Pakistan's western districts. Islamabad at the very minimum wishes to ensure that Kabul will not revive territorial disputes with Pakistan that go back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Finally, there is a risk that the counterterrorism coalition's success in Afghanistan will result in the export of embittered Taliban fighters to aid Pakistan in its territorial dispute with India in the Kashmir valley—something that India has said it is determined to prevent.

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The impact these regional actors will have on the approaches for providing assistance generate many problems and questions. They include knotty issues such as how to involve the Afghanis in the planning and delivery process for assistance. Who should represent the Afghans, for example? Can the same leaders responsible for much of the country's destruction genuinely help the reconstruction agenda? How can we address the need for security on the ground without inviting enmity with the factions that helped to expel the Taliban? How can avaricious warlords be prevented from badly skewing aid delivery or creating a public relations disaster?

The most ambitious—but still workable—plan is for the donors all to agree to strengthen the Kabul government and resurrect the pre-1970 Afghan political structure. However, even if there were broad donor support for such an effort, it isn't certain that aid donors could sustain a multiyear effort both to reconstruct the country and help reconstitute its political culture. More realistically, donors may need to accept that the "government" simply reflects the rival factions which expelled the Taliban, and to accept, therefore, that the government's authority, for the time being, is mostly putative.

Thus, it may be that in Afghanistan donor success will depend as much on the skill of western diplomacy to keep contending regional interests in check as it will on more obvious measures of the benefits of humanitarian and reconstruction aid within the country. Success will also depend on the ability of western diplomacy to head off major challenges to the post-Afghan settlement.

Democracy, Governance, and Conflict

Against this forbidding internal and external environment, what chance is there for a range of characteristically American responses to succeed? Can the United States seriously promote a range of programs that aim to inculcate democratic methods and political culture as the best long-term guarantor of stability and arbiter of faction and conflict? These are not small questions. Afghanistan will soon create a new constitution, but in the last century the country has seen many basic charters come and go. The country must also decide on how it will treat women, balance secular and religious interests, and create a new na-

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Many wonder whether we can afford to get involved in what looks like horribly difficult medium to long-term projects when so many more pressing emergencies—immunizing children and getting minimal cash income to people-demand our assistance. But if donors don't engage in these institutional issues from the early stages, the redistributional arrangements will evolve anyway, through warlord decisions and without benefit of our experience and expertise. Without the capacity to organize itself institutionally and to deliver community and social services, Afghanistan will remain dependent on donors to provide the wherewithal—but its distribution will be problematic.

At one level, democracy-focused programs have much to offer. They lead eventually to more transparency in governmental decisionmaking, a result especially welcome in postconflict situations. Parliamentary—rather than armed—competition for resources aimed at localities provides an important safety valve. Ideally, again, transparency can aid an incremental building of better governance. "Better governance," defined widely, can improve basic security, allowing delivery of humanitarian aid, creating the beginnings of a

plausible investment environment, engendering postconflict reconciliation, encouraging communities (rather than warlords) to prioritize needs, and creating an initial barrier against at least the most egregious forms of corruption.

Assuming that democracy-focused efforts make sense-and this prioritization will face strong skepticism—then direct provision assistance must take into account several factors. First, identifying real reformers and expanding their influence is hard. Reformers often do not have popular appeal, and yet they are the people who are going in the "right direction." Second, in working with reformers, the focus should remain on goals rather than individuals. Third, keeping the international donor community focused on the longer term and avoiding "pledge fixation" is also hard. Fourth, there may be a "disconnect" between amounts pledged and Afghanistan's capacity to absorb it (due to governance problems of which the lack of democratic transparency stands out most prominently). Fifth, the United States and others will undoubtedly "move on" to the next crisis in a few years. This may lead not just to compassion fatigue, which is not a problem at this point, but a loss of focus as well. Sixth, results-driven decisions to work with nongovernmental organizations can undermine prospects for deepened Afghan governance, as diversion of money and control from the local government and/or authorities will result. It will be difficult to shift the assistance later on back to the central government. Finally, donors must remember that some forms of assistance may lead to pragmatic factional cooperation, as in some types of health programs.

These considerations all bear on the impact of aid on governance and, more broadly,

on how failed states—or at least failed central authorities—can be gently prodded back to life. Recent experience suggests that government officials are accessible in the immediate postconflict situation before large amounts of aid flows in. At this moment, high-level officials are just finding their feet, and they can, and will, devote time to aid policy issues (if prodded to do so). Other lessons from postconflict situations (as in Bosnia), however, suggest that the new and externally imposed/sanctioned leaders often do not have the political will or the power to prevent reignition of conflict.

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In light of these considerations and opportunities, getting an interagency team on the ground early is the best approach to identifying reconstruction priorities. USAID staff should also take advantage of the enormous opportunities to develop relationships with senior officials and to address policy issues in the early phases of the reconstruction. Neither of these tasks can be as effectively accomplished from Washington, DC as they could from within Afghanistan.

Reviving a viable economy

It is fortunate that the recent war in Afghanistan was not as much about religion as it was about which Afghans, and which of their foreign allies, would be in power. Without a major ideological divide, it may prove possible

for the country to address its other internal conflicts peacefully—the most important of which are economic—under a new government.

There are five principles of postconflict reconstruction that Afghanistan and the donors will have to consider and assess. First, they must establish what are the appropriate initial conditions related to distribution of resources; this includes determining who has what resources and how they can best be brought into the "new game." Second, they must craft new rules that determine how power is allocated and disputes resolved. Third, they must assess the risks of reignition of conflict, because if the risk approaches 50 percent, economic investment becomes too risky. Fourth, they must consider what methods offer the best chance to "prime the economic pump." After more than two decades of economic decline in Afghanistan, the pump primer could be a comparatively low resource demand. Finally, they must determine what level of transparency can reasonably be achieved. Participation by outsiders inevitably will bring more transparency, if only because more people will know what's going on. Afghanistan is used to not being seen, and the world knows very little about the place.

Applying the results of the assessment

Guided by the outcome of this assessment, the economic reconstruction effort will be guided by a range of rather basic aims. For example, reestablishing initial conditions will mean getting people out of the refugee camps and back into their homes, reestablishing their access to production inputs (mostly agricultural), providing job opportunities for people with education, improving security by reducing access to arms among the population,

getting children back in school, and providing basic health care.

To achieve these basic aims, *new rules must* be crafted and internalized. Basic issues, such as reviving the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement, or crafting new trade rules with Pakistan, or fixing land ownership should be addressed early. Local decisionmaking should be encouraged. For example, as happened in the circumstances in Ethiopia, communities could decide together what to do about those who worked with the previous regime. Other rules-related issues include developing basic taxation systems, government budgetary procedures, and a minimal banking system.

People must also learn how to "share the risks" of restarting their economy. For example, demobilized soldiers and people who have been in camps may be given public works jobs. Irrigation systems will need rehabilitation. Imports will have to be financed and land mines removed. Vulnerable populations will need long-term assistance.

To prime the economic pump, the country will have to invest public-sector resources in new technology and crop alternatives, microfinance and business development strategies, public works spending, health and education, and infrastructure. The private sector will need to contribute to prioritizing the country's infrastructure needs, create business associations, and improve the telecommunications system.

Words of Caution

The United States has a legendarily short attention span. Many in the United States and elsewhere perceive the war from which Afghanistan is recovering as a war with the United States, rather than a civil war brought to an end by U.S.-led intervention. Aid flows often dry up shortly after a peace accord is achieved. In Ethiopia's case, for example, the amount of the entire aid package dipped below the value of immediate food aid supplied during and just after that country's civil war.

Given intense regional maneuvering, the potential for renewed conflict in Afghanistan remains high, especially given Pakistan's instability and internal Afghan rivalries. Lessons from postconflict situations in countries such as in Bosnia, however, suggest that the new, externally imposed/sanctioned leaders often do not have the political will or power to prevent reignition of conflict. Thus, the Agency—and

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the international donor community—must accept the possibilities of a factionalized, weak central Afghan state, a lack of political will, and of further conflict.

Against the daunting challenges of Afghan reconstruction, important special interest issues may fare badly. The moderation of the Afghan drug trade requires early, interagency agreements on a counternarcotics policy, plus an understanding that the drug trade must be approached as a *regional* issue involving Central Asia, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. The value of all aid programs pales next to the potential benefit that quickly liberalized Afghan-Pakistan trade could generate. Calming the broad diplomatic climate with neighbors will do more than anything else to create the right climate for economic growth.

Unless demobilization occurs across the board, security will remain tenuous. However, security forces for minimal patrolling and delivery of aid supplies will remain crucial. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan's violent society, the outright prevention of conflict may elude the best intentions. All donors face real security hazards; however, they also risk balkanizing the country if they are limited to working only in safe areas.

As the aid and reconstruction effort gather speed, donor coordination will be required, not simply to ensure more efficient aid delivery, but to maintain the health of the counterterrorism coalition.

Conclusion

In sum, rebuilding Afghanistan will require both patience and balance from USAID and other donors. Expectations are very high at the moment but will drop away quickly. Before donor interest declines—both as time passes and as disunity among the victorious anti-Taliban factions becomes more pressing and embarrassing—finding the adroit mix of local incentives will become even more pressing.

Doing so requires an intense focus on regional power dynamics. The phrase "donor cooperation" barely begins to capture the type of deep coordination needed among donors who must wrestle with contending regional power interests, intra-Afghan rivalries, and illicit trade in guns and drugs. Donors must also expect a high degree of aid leakage—all the more so if aid is to enable the weak, divided central government emerging from the Bonn Agreements to broker its way to greater consolidation of its power.

This is the second in a series of issue briefs that discuss important development issues raised in discussions, roundtables, seminars, and other fora supported by the Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination of USAID. Issue Brief 2 is a synopsis of the second meeting of USAID's Working Group on The Impact of the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid and the War on Terrorism, held on December 7, 2001.

Featured participants in the discussion were Karen Turner, USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East; Jim Vermillion, USAID Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Democracy and Governance; Dayton Maxwell, Special Advisor to the USAID Administrator, Conflict Task Force; Emmy Simmons, Assistant Administrator for Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade; and Barbara Turner, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Policy and Program Coordination.

James Clad, Senior Counselor in USAID's Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, prepared this synopsis.

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For more information, contact:

U.S. Agency for International Development

Washington, D.C. 20523-1000 Telephone: 202-712-4810

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